

Sermon 4 Advent
December 17, 2011
Church of the Redeemer, Bethesda
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The Wisdom of the Deeper Self

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" The angel said to her, "the Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God." Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her.

Luke 1:26-38

Mary and Joseph receive the news that they are to be parents of a child sent from God in different ways. Mary is visited by an angel, which is, as we might all imagine, a perplexing experience and she ponders what it might mean. When the angel explains his purpose, she presses him further. The angel explains some more, enough to satisfy Mary. "All right," she says at last, "Let it be as you say."

The exchange between Gabriel and Mary may not have transpired as quickly and seamlessly as the Gospel of Luke reports. Generally, it takes time to ponder such unexpected, spectacular news; time to consider an invitation of great magnitude; time, in the face of all that would convince one to say "no," to get to "yes."

For the man, things unfold a bit differently, as they always do with a pregnancy. To learn Joseph's side of the story, we must wander over to the Gospel of Matthew. There we learn that Mary first tells Joseph the news, as all women must. He doesn't believe her story at first about Gabriel's visit and being overshadowed by the Holy Spirit. He resolves to break off their engagement, as any righteous man would at the news that his betrothed was pregnant with another man's child.

But then Joseph has a dream, and in the dream a voice speaks: "Don't be afraid to take Mary as your wife. The child is holy, and you are to raise him as your son." It was the first of several dreams to guide Joseph on his path of parenthood, dreams that spoke to him at decisive moments, telling him what to do. And for reasons known to Joseph alone, he decided to trust his dreams, trust the voice, trust Mary, and add his "yes" to hers.

Angels and dreams: the stuff of fairytales, perhaps. But what Joseph and Mary share with every human being is the experience of being faced with something big, far bigger than they. Their task is to make sense of what was before them, incredible as it was, and respond. The place they go to do that work of sense-making is inside themselves. Mary ponders in her heart; Joseph allows his dreams to guide him. They both listen to the voice inside to inform their interpretation and response.

In the Christian life there are many places to go for needed perspective and insight, all important. My focus this morning is that place inside where God can speak, as the Scripture says, in a still, small voice; a place where we can ponder, reflect on the meaning of things, to interpret the signs, signals, and invitations that come to us, and then choose from among many options in the work of crafting, or *composing* our lives¹. Without such internal effort to ponder, interpret, and make thoughtful choices, we put ourselves in the hands of all the forces that seek to define us from the outside; we are tossed to and fro, as St. Paul wrote, and blown about by every wind. Without an inner compass, we are more likely to say no out of fear or yes out of compulsion to everything invitation that comes our way.

As with all practices, this one of inner listening is not uniquely Christian. All spiritual traditions uphold practices of prayer, meditation, and discernment. Those who study the lives of great leaders, both past and present, point to a core of inner strength common to all those who are neither claimed by chaos around them nor satisfied with mediocrity that most settle for; who are unafraid to be themselves, yet willing to be more than themselves. The poet and author David Whyte speaks of awakening the “inner captain,” that internal source of authority and clarity, especially needed when we attempt something difficult.²

What distinguishes this inner work for Christians is the intentional invitation to God and expectation that God will address us internally if we make space to listen. It’s not as easy as it may sound, but it’s also not as difficult as we make it to be. What God needs and what we need is a bit time and space for pondering; what God needs and what we need is our openness to the unexpected insight that comes seemingly from nowhere and a willingness to trust that insight may be of God. As Christians, we are continually being called to be more than we have been, and trust what we hear inside and risk stepping out in faith.

One might simply call the inner life of a Christian “prayer,” but if so, the kind of prayer I’m speaking of is quite particular. It is, if you will, *interpretive* prayer, the inner conversation we have to bring meaning to events or circumstances, and also *discerning* prayer, the process we go through to help us decide what to do in response to an event or circumstance or invitation. The Christian writer Urban Holmes defines discernment this way: “the ability to intuit God’s will by a casting a particular question the Christian faces in a given situation before the judgment of the deeper self. The result of discernment will be a willingness to risk decisions and take actions whose surety is enigmatic at best.”³ The result of discernment, then, is a greater capacity to act in the face of uncertainty, a willingness to risk failure in the service of what matters most.

So how do we go about this discerning, interpretive task? What do we do when we’re pondering?

We can do many things. For some, the work is quiet and still, a daily practice of sitting and paying attention to all that comes into consciousness. Others, like Joseph, pay

¹ Phrase taken from the book by Mary Catherine Bateson, *Composing a Life* (New York: Grove Press, 1989).

² David Whyte, *Crossing the Unknown Sea: Work as a Pilgrimage of Identity* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2001), 45.

³ Source unknown. This quote comes from a colleague, Andrew Waldo, who quotes Urban Holmes in a talk he gives on discernment at CREDO conferences.

attention to their dreams. For others, to ponder means requires movement—a walk or a run, anything that engages both body and mind. I read a history of Franklin Delano Roosevelt a few years back, and I learned that when he had a momentous decision before him, he would get sick and take to his bed. President Obama apparently spends a lot of time shooting basketball. I'm one of those who “putters” as I ponder. It doesn't really matter what I do, but I need to be active, and I need quiet, to allow my brain to sort things out and be open to the voice of God. I don't mean to imply that other people aren't helpful in the discerning process, for they are. Hearing ourselves speak the issues we're carrying can be clarifying, as can hearing the perspectives of others. In the end, though, there is something wonderfully solitary about this process, as we claim for ourselves the path we will take, and claim it as ours.

One of the more helpful practices of pondering that I have been taught is described in a small book entitled, *Sleeping With Bread*.⁴ The book's title comes from a story told about children left orphaned and starving during the Second World War. When at last they were given food in refugee camps, they couldn't trust that there would be more later on, so they ate themselves sick at every meal. Their caregivers' solution was to give the children a loaf of bread as they went to bed. They could sleep, then, with confidence that there would be food for them in the morning. Inspired by the children holding their loaves of bread, the authors describe a simple practice of holding onto what gives us life, especially in times of uncertainty and transition.

The practice is this: at the end of each day take a few moments to reflect, asking two questions: For what moment today am I most grateful? For what moment am I least grateful? There are many ways to ask the same questions: When did I feel the most alive today? When did I feel life draining out of me? When did I give and receive the most love? When did I give and receive the least? This practice, exercised over time, heightens our awareness of moments we might have otherwise passed by as insignificant, moments that can ultimately give direction for our lives. It helps to write our reflections down, a few sentences each day, so that we might watch for patterns as they emerge over time.

When at a particular crossroad, or when striving to discern a particular path, when the ground beneath us shifts, a simple practice of reflection of what gives us life and what takes life away from us, can serve as a source of guidance and consolation. For the spiritual assumption behind this practice is that God's desire for us is greater life, not less. And should we discern that a costly, difficult road is ours to take, we can do so equipped with a greater reservoir of what sustains us in lean times.

I don't want to leave you with the impression that I believe it's possible through these practices to receive complete clarity about how we are to make our way in this life. I don't believe that, and I have never myself attained it. But a little bit of clarity goes a long way. A little bit goes a long way in helping us sift through the endless demands and focus on what matters most; a little bit goes a long way in helping us say no to the many worthwhile tasks in order to say yes to the few tasks we are called to; a little bit of clarity helps us to let go of what is no longer compatible with our lives and reach for what our heart desires, because at last we know something about it. And if by grace, we are invited, as Mary and Joseph were, to do something truly amazing for the world, we will have the capacity and spiritual strength to say yes.

⁴ Dennis, Sheila and Matthew Linn, *Sleeping with Bread: Holding What Gives You Life* (Mahwah, NY: Paulist Press, 1995).